Bridging The Gap In Darfur

The Wall Street Journal Europe, 7 June 2005

The recent pledge by a number of countries of a further $300 million to support the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) was helpful, even if it didn't reach the AU's goal of $466 million. The associated EU and NATO pledges of air transport, materiel and some military training were also steps in the right direction. But they were far too small given the continuing enormity of the Darfur problem. What's more, the high-level conference in Addis Ababa avoided the most pressing issue: The African Union may have the best will in the world, but with the kind of support now on offer it is simply not able to do what is necessary, with the requisite urgency, to prevent tens of thousands more lives from being lost.

Thus far, in an understandable effort to maintain the mission's African face, the AU and its international partners have been very clear about not wanting to put Western troops on the ground. Yet if all other military protection options fail, as it looks like they will, a multinational intervention force may be needed to fill the gap until the AU can take up the entire task.

Even after the Addis Ababa conference, AMIS in its present form has two serious weaknesses: its mandate, and its size and capacity. AMIS's current mandate, as authorized by the AU Peace and Security Council, focuses on monitoring and verification. It can only "protect civilians whom it encounters under imminent threat and in the immediate vicinity, within resources and capability." Considering the Sudanese government has repeatedly failed to stop the violence, this is not enough to stand between the marauding Janjaweed militias and their victims. AMIS's mandate must be strengthened both to enable and to encourage it to undertake all necessary measures, including proactive action, to protect civilians.

AMIS also lacks both size and capacity. The force is supposed to have about 3,300 personnel in Darfur -- though they remain short by some 600 civilian police -- and this number is targeted to rise to 7,700 by September. But a minimum presence of 12,000 to 15,000 personnel is needed right now to undertake the tasks of protecting villages against further attack or destruction, protecting those who have been displaced within Sudan against forced repatriation and intimidation, protecting women from systematic rape outside the camps where they are living, providing security for humanitarian operations, and neutralizing the Janjaweed. A battalion group (infantry plus support elements) should be deployed in each of the eight sectors, along with a ninth battalion in reserve, 700 to 1,000 military observers, 1,500 to 2,000 civilian police, and 1,000 headquarters and other staff. After all, with Darfur we are talking about an area the size of France or Texas with a population of some six million; well over two million of them already have been forced out of their homes.

As much the AU might like to be able to deploy a force of this size within an acceptable time frame (around 60 days), and as much as the rest of the world would welcome a fully African
operation, there is simply no way the AU can do it alone. At its present rate AMIS will be hard-pressed to meet even its September target, let alone big increments beyond that.

Ideally, the force so urgently needed would comprise more African troops, with stronger international support to help them deploy quickly. No single African state is in a position to provide lead-nation troop numbers, so this would mean an aggregation of smaller contributions. But there are huge difficulties in deploying, on such an urgent basis, a sufficient number of trained troops with the necessary interoperability.

To pledges they have already made, the EU and NATO would have to provide more training, more direct command and control support, and much more help with troop movement, including at the tactical mission level. If all these additional needs could be met -- which would certainly involve non-Africans being on the ground in various locations within Darfur -- it might be possible to preserve the principle that only African personnel would interact with Sudanese.

However, achieving all this before any more precious time is lost would be a very tall order, perhaps an impossible one. If the international community is to meet its responsibility to protect the people of Darfur, it will also have to make available, and encourage the African Union to accept, a multinational bridging force until the full African force is assembled.

NATO would appear to be the organization best equipped to provide and lead the additional troops in the numbers and time frame required. It has ample planning, command and control, and logistic support, and sufficiently interoperable troops and resources at its disposal. Because Turkey is a member, NATO could potentially draw on a large pool of well-trained, non-Arab Muslim troops, which would be particularly appropriate in a Darfur context.

There will continue to be African as well as European sensitivities -- not least in France -- about engaging forces under the banner of NATO, rather than Europe as such, in this kind of operation. But there do not appear to be any European countries willing and presently able single-handedly to take on the present task; the small multination battle groups now being brought to readiness are also not large enough. Europe as Europe simply doesn't yet have NATO's planning, command and control, and logistic support capability. And in any event the European Union, reeling from the French and Dutch "no" votes on the constitution, may simply not be in the mood right now to tackle so major a political decision.

Such a NATO operation would be designed only to tackle Darfur's most urgent civilian protection needs until the AU is fully staffed and mission-capable. Some may say such a proposal is too bold, but with as many as 10,000 men, women and children still dying in Darfur every month, the overwhelming imperative need is for those with the capacity and the will to put additional capable forces on the ground now.